

International Review of Psychoanalysis of Couple and Family

N° 6-2009/2 – Link

THE CONCEPT OF LINK IN COUPLE AND FAMILY PSYCHOANALYSIS. PART 1

*ISIDORO BERENSTEIN**

1. Brief definition of the link.

I consider that the link is the connection which joins or binds two or more people (I prefer to call them subjects) together in a seemingly stable bond. The production of this link is by means of two mechanisms: 1) A predominantly individual mechanism based on the object relation which functions by means of projective identification. The partner or other member of the relationship may also employ the same type of individual-based mechanism, in which case there is a relationship between two crossed individuals. 2) As an "in-between" mechanism in which the link is the result of what I call "interference" between subjects¹² in what is a "subject relationship" as distinct from, and supplementary to the mechanism based on object relations. This mechanism involves the "imposition" of differences between the subjects, that is to say one of the subjects interferes with the identificatory movement of the other's ego. What interferes with us is the otherness of the other subject, which cannot be dealt with via identification but rather by a process of imposition. Otherness refers to a component, integral part of each of us, which belongs to us but which is foreign and unfamiliar to the other. Each of the members of a link must make, produce, a space for this otherness in the relationship. It is through the

* Argentina. Email: Iberens@fibertel.com.ar

¹² I use the concept of subjectivity to refer to the set of elements that constructs our way of being and doing which corresponds to our inner world, the world of the relationships with the family and the couple, and the inscription and processing of the social world that surrounds us. Each of these worlds has different psychic mechanisms and possibly requires different models

production of this space that the subjects are able to be different from that which they would have been individually or in a relationship with a different partner. This mechanism relates to how one subject will affect the other members of the relationship by being there, by being different and by interfering with the identificatory process of the other subjects. I call "effect of presence" the influence of the otherness of each subject on the others in the relationship. The spouse, each child, brothers or sisters are all marked by this feature of otherness. It is because of this that they are familiar yet at the same time unfamiliar, like a stranger or a foreigner, like somebody occasionally not recognized. This is not only because there are conflicts between them but because this difference and this otherness are present by structure and/or by principle. We can consider that the individual and the "in-between" mechanisms are intertwined, which is why we need to work therapeutically with both of them.

2. Being connected in couples and families.

We can describe 3 modalities of being connected: **a) Being together but keeping separate.** In this situation, one individual exists beside the other but maintains their own way of being. Each of them retains their identity in accordance with their personal history and individual structure, and being part of a couple or a family does not modify their individual structure. **b) Being related within a relationship.** By means of identificatory mechanisms, one member of the relationship helps another member to re-live the marks of a past object (for example, homosexual father sodomising the child, the brother who has been sodomised, the Oedipal mother etc). This enables the development of the unconscious fantasies of each subject with the help of the other member of the couple or the help of their children, which facilitates the repetition of old patterns. **c) Being linked.** Each member of the link, through a specific operation, gives a place to the otherness of the other. This mechanism produces (not only reproduces) an interfantasmatic network where each other has a place and plays a role. It is this which produces the subjects of the link, giving them the quality of newness which is specific to that particular link. By means of this operation, the family group or the couple acquire new marks which did not previously exist and which do not derive from infantile life. These three modalities are characterised by an increasing complexity in the relationship. It is important to highlight that they do not constitute a developmental process, nor are they dependent on the length of time that the members of the couple or family live together. Each modality may continue over time, or there may be a

change from one modality to another, which may later revert to the previous modality, and they may coexist simultaneously.

3. Considerations regarding technique.

There are two modalities which have a bearing on the therapeutic relationship: 1) Transference, which everyone here is familiar with. This can be clearly seen in the session when the therapist explores the effects of his two-week absence. II) Interference, which is a characteristic of the link and which is produced in this “in between” space, providing an instrument to be worked with during the session. So, how does interference work? Interference is not the result of working through, as is the case with transference, but rather is bound up with making a space for the otherness of the other subject, who is different. The therapist needs to take care to avoid explaining this space in terms of past situations. Interference and transference are two therapeutic tools. Nevertheless, they are two worlds which have different logics: one is based on presence whilst the other is based on absence; one is based on production whilst the other is based on reproduction or repetition, and both must be dealt with.

THE CONCEPT OF LINK IN COUPLE AND FAMILY PSYCHOANALYSIS. PART 2

Clinical Comments

1. Understanding the clinical material in the light of the previous explanation.

What is customary with therapists is that when we listen to clinical material and later read the previous case history of the patient we say: “Ah, now I understand what is happening in the session”, and what continues is the habitual way of working by connecting the present data with past events. Understanding clinical material using past experiences means deriving meaning from a kind of repetition of traumatic or infantile episodes which are reproduced in the analytical session. This may of course happen. However, at times, this does not allow us to fully appreciate that we are part of a process of production arising from the members in the session, a process which is characterised in large part, by uncertainty and “indetermination”. I would like to be clear about the following: the childhood of each individual does give meaning to this clinical material and repetition is an important mechanism. However, what I would like to stress is that this exists together with other

mechanism which are produced in the “in between” world of two or more people who share this link in the therapeutic situation, and who respond to what I call the effect of presence.

2. Commentary on clinical material. I will only comment on the beginning of the session so that other participants can offer their viewpoint on other aspects of what is a very interesting session.

We are dealing with a family comprising of a couple and their children.

a) The mother complains that things are not going well sexually and that she feels helpless to change anything. “Things” are not going well (the manifest content is to do with sex) “between” herself and her partner and she, alone, feels helpless to resolve something which is “between” the two members of the couple. Her thinking is that one person, she or Lars, should change something, but individually. It would appear that she, and probably Lars, have difficulties in understanding that it is the functioning of the couple constructed by both members, with the physical participation of both bodies, with their combined interfantasmatic production, which sustains the sexual difficulties in their relationship. That is to say that she alone is not enough to change the functioning of the relationship as this change requires both members. Individually, she can only change her participation in the relationship, and her tendency to repeat and to involve the other in this repetition.

b) In the session, Jeanette says that she is constructing a secret hiding place, and that no one knows this. While the sexual difficulties of the parents are discussed in an open space in the session and in the family setting, the child is playing at having a secret space. It may be that if infantile sexuality is a public space in this family, it is hoped that now there is a secret place and that this can be built-produced in the session. I suggest considering that this might not only be an unconscious phantasy of the child which she unknowingly verbalises but that it is also an interfantasmatic production that unveils the unconscious assumption that everything is open and exposed, and that the family has no hiding place to protect them from the past. This is rooted in the transgenerational lack of sexual boundaries, transmitted from the parents to the children. Now the children have become parents and transmit this “public” sexuality to their children by means of their actions and without words.

c) The sexuality of the parents can or should be a secret place where it is possible to hide and not be seen by the children. Maybe the fact that the therapy was couple/sex therapy and family therapy

helped to establish spaces which are differentiated from the lack of a secret, private space in the family relationships. Bearing in mind that the infantile relationships of the parents were transgressive and may have been transmitted transgenerationally, this kind of invasive sexuality may have had an effect on the children in this family.

d) Alex says it would be a good idea for his sister, Jeanette, not to take all the building blocks so that they can share them. He is worried that his sister will use all the building blocks for herself. This could reflect his concern that his parents will use the session all for themselves. It may be that the family history and the family structure give little space for the children to be children and for the parents to be parents.

e) The therapist includes a transference interpretation saying that what happens at the beginning of the session depends on the lack of the effect of presence given that he had been away for the previous two weeks. He suggests that this may have caused one of their episodes of stagnation. He tries to include Lars again.

f) One working hypothesis could be that the snowballing (mentioned by Velia) is a snowball of infantile situations which develops uncontrollably due to the absence of the partner (who despite being there in the relationship is perceived to be chronically absent) and due to the absence of the therapist (2-week absence) in the transference. This individual "snowballing" could be controlled by the presence of the partner interfering in the repetition of the infantile situation. Being part of a link would make it possible to build a means of controlling this infantile dependency. When this "in-between" world fails or is not produced, what can be seen is an ever-increasing dependency on infantile images and the continuation of a repetitive cycle (the "snowballing").

g) The therapist attributes the fall in Lars's self-esteem to the relationship between Lars and his father. Here the link overlaps with the object relation.

h) Our question, because we are individual psychoanalysts as well as couple/family psychoanalysts, is whether the treatment of the family or couple equates to the treatment of an individual. My suggestion is that family therapy must deal with another space, which is regulated by the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Several years ago, I referred to this as the "unconscious family structure". My feeling is that a broadening of our current approach would help us to better understand and deal with the combined effect of two or more linked individuals.